

# Investigators Open Negligence Case Against Serdyukov

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Former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. **Dmitry Abramov**

The Investigative Committee said Thursday that it had opened a criminal case on suspicion of negligence against former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who had long been a witness in the ongoing Oboronservis corruption case but had escaped prosecution.

The move was alternatively interpreted by analysts as a sign that more serious charges will follow or as a face-saving gesture by the Kremlin that will not result in any major penalties for Serdyukov.

The Oboronservis case against alleged graft at the Defense Ministry, which was initiated in 2012, has been touted by the authorities as the most high-profile effort in the struggle against corruption but dismissed by the opposition as nothing more than part of a turf war between Kremlin clans. Critics have accused the authorities of using the case as a PR stunt rather than

a genuine anti-corruption drive, citing the fact that Serdyukov had not been detained or prosecuted.

Serdyukov is accused of using government funds to finance the construction of a road to the Zhitnoye resort in the Volga delta in the Astrakhan region, the Investigative Committee said Thursday. The resort belongs to Serdyukov's brother-in-law, Valery Puzikov.

Damage incurred by the government as a result of Serdyukov's purported actions is estimated at 56 million rubles (\$1.7 million). Negligence, the offense of which he is accused, is punishable with a fine of up to 120,000 rubles, community service of up to one year or imprisonment of up to three months.

The former minister will be questioned as a suspect on Dec. 3, his lawyer Konstantin Rivkin told the RPSI news agency.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said that the Investigative Committee might be "putting out feelers" before bringing more serious charges.

"I do not rule out a long series of criminal cases against Serdyukov," he said.

Alternatively, Mukhin said, the move could be revenge by the Investigative Committee for the interview that Yevgenia Vasilyeva, a former Defense Ministry official and the main suspect in the Oboronservis case, gave to journalist Ksenia Sobchak on Dozhd television on Wednesday. Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said Thursday that Vasilyeva had been giving "signals" to her accomplices in the interview, adding that investigators would seek to transfer Vasilyeva, who is currently under house arrest, to a detention facility.

Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin, head of the Merkator research group, disagreed with Mukhin's assessment, however, saying the charges brought against the former minister were a sign that the authorities were starting to wind the case down.

Apart from being very mild, the charges are formulated in an absurd way and it will be easy to refute them in court, he said, adding that Serdyukov would likely be acquitted.

Explaining the rationale for the criminal case, Oreshkin said that the authorities had to throw the public a bone, as many people have been worked up about corruption ever since one Kremlin clan divulged information about alleged foul play at the Defense Ministry in 2012.

But the authorities cannot imprison Serdyukov because that would be at odds with the Russian elite's informal rules, under which no bureaucrats who toe the Kremlin's line can be put behind bars, Oreshkin said.

"If someone loses in a conflict, he is quietly whisked out of his chair and transferred to another one, where he is allowed to live out the rest of his life," he said.

The Oboronservis case has been seen by many as the result of a conflict between Serdyukov

and two Kremlin heavyweights, presidential chief of staff Sergei Ivanov and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin. Another theory, cited by columnist Yulia Latynina, is that the case stems from a love affair, and that former Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, an ally of Ivanov, was unhappy with Serdyukov allegedly leaving his wife, Zubkov's daughter Yulia Pokhlebenina, for Vasilyeva.

Serdyukov has also clashed with high-ranking army generals who were unhappy with his reform of the military, including with the sale of noncore assets run by the Defense Ministry.

At least seven people have become suspects in the Oboronservis case and are accused of fraud and of selling property belonging to state-owned company Oboronservis at below-market prices.

Several buildings in downtown Moscow owned by Oboronservis were bought in 2011 by VitaProject, a company that was controlled by Vasilyeva at the time. She became a target of the public's ire after searches of her luxury apartment revealed enormous wealth, and she was later reportedly seen frequenting high-end boutiques despite her house arrest.

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